

THE ALGERIAN LIBERATION WAR IN BLACK AMERICAN FICTION

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In his presentation of the works of African Americans in Paris, Professor Michel Fabre singles out William Gardner Smith's novel, The Stone Face:

Ce livre [he writes] [...] est l'un des rares témoignages de la solidarité avec le peuple algérien, émanant d'un écrivain noir américain.

[This is one of the very few books written by Black Americans to bear witness of their solidarity with the Algerian people.]

Twenty-five years later -- the book was published in 1963, William Gardner Smith's sister, Mrs. Phyllis Earle Ford, reminiscing on her first impression of it says:

I remember saying to myself, why is he bothering to write about Algeria? I thought that was misplaced in it. We were so... I'm glad now that he's found sympathy with other people.²

These two statements underscore the problematic nature of the relations between the Algerian Revolution and what came to be known, in its most radical phase, as the Black American Revolution. If the similarity between the two struggles for dignity was perceived - individually - by such writers as Richard Wright³ and Chester Himes⁴, it did not lead to any unmitigated

collective statement of support comparable, say, to the Manifeste des 121.⁵ Symptomatic of this equivocation, was the now famous (or infamous) 'Gibson Affair', a tentative gesture of solidarity with Algerian nationalism, which led to an imbroglio of accusations, counter accusations and denials worthy of a Chester Himes whodunnit. Such a gingerly stance was, naturally enough, quite understandable at the time. With France living then under a virtual, and at times actual, state of siege and America experiencing the white backlash that followed Desegregation, any interference with what was regarded as an essentially domestic issue, would have caused the culprit to be sent packing to his douar d'origine -- to use colonial Algeria's parlance -- be it Little Rock, Arkansas or Montgomery, Alabama.

Apart from the political circumstances, there was also another factor which may explain the Black expatriates' wavering : it is the issue of ethnic loyalty. It is frankly expounded by Babe, one of the most outspoken and colourful characters of the The Stone Face:

Algerians are white people. They feel like white people when they are with Negroes, don't make no mistake about it. A black man's got enough trouble in the world without going about defending white people.⁷

This gruff reminder, addressed to Simeon Brown, the hero of William Gardner Smith's novel, is no doubt another reason which may account for the African Americans' reluctance to be involved in what could be called -- rather simplistically -- an inter-white conflict. The interaction of the political and racial issues, with all that implies in terms of moral responsibility, is precisely the focal point of The Stone Face.

The unraveling of this Gordian knot, first in the fictional world and then in real life, is what I propose to call William Gardner Smith's Algerian experience in Paris.

In order to reconnoitre this itinéraire de lucidité, this painful progress towards self-awareness and commitment, I shall in the first instance, examine in what ways The Stone Face departs from Black American fiction touching upon the same subject.

Secondly I shall seek to explore the formal and stylistic strategies used by the author in order to convey his solidarity with Algerian nationalism.

Finally I shall stray from the world of fiction to that of biography with a view to contending that William Gardner Smith was, like Frantz Fanon, one of those Third World humanists who pioneered the way towards a closer sense of kinship between struggling Africa and Black America.

Before coming to the heart of the matter, let me first give a summary of The Stone Face.

Simeon Brown, a one-eyed African American journalist and amateur painter arrives in Paris in May 1960, at the height of political turmoil over the Algerian issue, to escape the racial violence of his native Philadelphia. He is soon adopted by his fellow expatriates and falls in love with a Polish-Jewish girl, Maria, near-blind, and an aspiring actress. Simeon enjoys, for the first time of his life, an existence freed from racial prejudice. Soon he discovers through his friendship with Algerians: Hossein, a former Free French volunteer, Ahmed a medical student, Djamilia and Latifa, former political detainees, that the latter are the 'niggers' of France. Their social predicament is further compounded by the fact that they have resolved to attain political liberation through armed struggle. His relations with them, strained at first and some time at the brink of break up, become closer and closer as he gets to know them better after until the moment he finds himself siding with them. In the meantime, after a successful surgery, Maria recovers her eyesight, gradually withdraws from him and goes with a White producer to a bright cinema career in the States.

In the end he realizes that 'birds of the same feather stick together' while at the same time coming to the conclusion that the confrontation between what he calls Un-man and humanity transcends ethnic boundaries. This makes him supersede the crippling factor of race and induces him to engage in a political and moral crusade. Leaving his fellow-expatriates to their petty comforts, he returns to America to fight for the advent of a more humane world.

Roman d'édification, auto-biographical novel, roman à thèse, initiation quest, The Stone Face is all these; but it is above all, to my mind at least, the foreign novel which has best rendered the Algerians' plight in the unacknowledged battlefield of Paris in the late fifties and early sixties.

A comparison with James Baldwin's short story, 'This morning, this evening, so soon' (first published in The Atlantic Monthly in 1963), may be quite edifying. Here too is a Black American - a singer - who goes back to America, but rather sheepishly. The city he leaves behind is pregnant with unhappiness and strife. Though being fought overseas, the Algerian war with its potential for sectarianism and maiming, is encroaching upon the lives of the people of Paris.

Trudging along the Seine, the narrator-hero sees a paratrooper walking towards Ecole Militaire and concludes that he is also walking, almost certainly and rather sooner than later, toward Algeria* ... and towards his doom. Though he does not say the word, he certainly implies it as he mentions, in the same breath, the case of a friend of his who has returned from Algeria half-blind. Later on he thinks compassionately of the Algerians who used to be seen in the streets of Paris but who are now 'scattered or corralled the Lord knows where.' A whiff of nostalgia breathes through his evocation of the good old days when he used to live among them as if they were his brothers. But these days are gone. He has withdrawn from them as he feels that they threaten the nation which has protected him:

They were perfectly prepared to drive all Frenchmen to the sea [from Algeria] and level the city of Paris. But I could not hate the French because they left me alone. And I love Paris, I will always love it ; it is the city which saved my life.¹⁰

William Gardner Smith's Paris is no mere decor designed to echo and amplify the hero's despondency, nor his Algerians mere shadows vanishing in the thin air at the sight of the first képi. One of the most dramatic and memorable episodes of The Stone Face is the account of the Algerians' huge demonstration of 17 October 1961 and the ensuing savage repression¹¹. The same vividness is used to convey the sadistic torturing of Latifa and Djamilia (inspired by the martyrism of Djamilia Boupacha and Djamilia Bouhired), the brutal police swoopings upon the Algerian ghetto of Barbès, and the general manhunt that prevailed in the streets of Paris. The Algerians are portrayed as people of flesh and blood, as if by a Maghrebi writer who knows how it is to be an exile in the French capital. Here is Hussein for instance, sprung as though from the pages of Driss Chraïbi's Les Boucs, provocatively addressing Simeon:

We're the niggers here! Know what the French call us? bicot, melon, raton, nor'af. That means nigger in French. Ain't you scared we might rob you? Ain't you appalled by our body odour? No but seriously, I want to ask you a serious question -- would you let your daughter marry one of us?¹²

Their suffering and their anger, their generosity and their conviviality are rendered with an empathy which can only stem from a sense of companionship, of shared humanity:

It was like Harlem, Simeon thought, except that there were fewer cops in Harlem, but may be that too would come one day. Like Harlem and like all ghettos in the world. The men he saw through the window of the bus had whiter skins and less fizzy hair, but they were in other ways like the Negroes of the United States. They adopted the same poses: "stashing" on corners, ready for and scared of the ever possible "trouble", eyes sullen and distrusting, dressed in pegged pants, flashy shirts and narrow-pointed shoes. He could almost hear them saying: "watchu puttin' down, man?", "Jus' playin' it cool, jus' playin' it cool, man, trying to keep Ole Charlie off my back". Ole Charlie paced the street, waving his submachine gun. Simeon watched everything, remembering how it was on South Street and Lombard Street, feeling the old unbearable frustration and anger, the fear and defiance.¹³

William Gardner Smith's counterpointing Ahmed's death with the indifference of those who have decided to wash their hands of the Algerian tragedy is recounted with genuine grief:

Clyde drank at the Monaco to forget about Jinx, Jinx drank at the Select to forget about herself, Doug made love to his State Department girl, Babe belched after a gigantic meal and joked off a feeling of guilt, Benson lay drunk and bitter in bed with his mistress, and Ahmed lay dead, his head battered to a pulp by police clubs, on the corner of Rue du Bac and the Boulevard Saint Germain. [...] Curled up like a child on his side, face twisted in a grimace, arms still protectively raised over his head, he looked even more youthful than in life.¹⁴

Simeon's intense sorrow is the natural outcome of a gradual and painful process of maturation, acquired in his rite of passage from the gleam of the Champs-Élysées to the ghostly world of La Goutte d'Or. It is this descent into Hell, which by reminding him of his roots, awakens him to his responsibilities. And the faith of the Algerians, their resilience in the face of insuperable odds make him draw on his people's tradition of struggle for spiritual sustenance:

How he revolted with the slaves, revolted with Denmark Vesey and Gabriel and Nat Turner, fought them Crackers, saw the flood flow, saw his brothers fall, but fought all the same.¹⁵

At the end of the book, Simeon contemplates the possibility of volunteering to fight for Africa's liberation (in Algeria, in Angola in The Congo). but in the last resort, he books a passage to America and steels himself for the day of reckoning:

America's Algerians were back there fighting a battle harder than that of any guerillas in any burnt mountain. Fighting the Stone Face.¹⁶

It has become evident by now -- I presume -- that the 'stone face' is the central metaphor in the book. It is associated with another, blindness. It is through their interplay that William Gardner Smith charts Simeon's search for self-identity. At the beginning of the novel, Simeon paints a man's head he calls the 'stone face', a grotesque mask of racism and hatred:

[...] the jaw was clamped tight, the mouth was a compressed bitter line, the skin was deathly pale, the eyes were flat, fanatic, sadistic and cold. It was an inhuman face, the face of Un-man, the face of discord, the face of destruction.¹⁷

As we are to gather later in the book, this face he has encountered first in Philadelphia where, as a youth, he was assaulted by a Polish boy, Chris, who left him blind in one eye. It is also the face of Mike, the policeman who beat him sadistically because he found him in a White neighbourhood; of the unknown sailor who attacked him because he was with a white girl. The face he sees again or imagines in Paris whenever he witnesses an instance of gratuitous brutalisation: on Lumumba's Black assassins, on the crowd of Southern Whites preventing Black school girls from attending an all-White school. He sees it again on the French policeman mercilessly hitting an Algerian woman and her child on that fateful October night which was to seal Simeon's commitment. The blow he struck at the policeman is emblematic of his readiness to resort to revolutionary counter-violence.

Simeon's one-eyedness symbolises his initial ambiguous status in Paris. He is at first a white man in the eyes of the Algerians but a Black man still in the eyes of French and American authorities. When he is about to withdraw from the Algerians, he has a dream in which he sees himself with his two eyes and his tortured brothers turned blind. He interprets this dream as a symbol of his incipient betrayal towards all those who have been robbed of their dignity. Maria's recovery of her eyesight coincides with her choosing to regain her 'White' status. When he finally decides to side with the underdogs -- his inward eye being at long last opened -- he ritually destroys the painting, thus exorcising his fears and obsessions.

The three-part structure of the novel frames Simeon's development. In Part I, The Fugitive, the focus is on his experience as an expatriate trying to come to terms with a past of violence while adjusting to a seemingly peaceful and non-racialist society. Part II, The Whiteman, emphasises 'the temptation of Whiteness' while bringing out at the same time all that it entails in terms of insensitivity, self-centeredness, de-humanisation even. Finally Part III, Brother, brings to a conclusion Simeon's quest. He no longer feels 'like a man without a country, like The Wandering Jew';¹⁸ he finally says the word frère to the Algerians who have come to regard him as a brother.

Though the work seems to be rather contrived structurally and didactic in purpose, there nevertheless breathes through it an indubitable sincerity of tone.

The question that must be asked now is: wasn't Simeon Brown a convenient alter ego created by William Gardner Smith for the purpose of acting out, by proxy as it were, what he was unable or unwilling to do in real life? This comes to searching for some clues in his biography.

Asked to say whether she knew anything about her son's position regarding the Algerian problem, or whether he mentioned Algeria at all in his letters, his mother, Mrs. Edith Earle, answered in the negative.¹⁹

On the other hand, Leroy S. Hodges states that Mrs. Solange Royez, William Gardner Smith's second wife, in response to a similar question, wrote to him a letter saying that 'Bill felt in complete solidarity with the Algerian F. L.N.'²⁰ In the same letter, Mrs. Royez said that

he talked and talked (mainly about politics). He seemed pleased to hear [Solange] was a Communist and [they] shared a common desire to bring more justice to the world.²¹

Chester Himes, for his part, adds that 'youth was the most outstanding characteristic of William Gardner Smith - youth and naivety.'²² If we add to this portrait the fact that he was a militant of the N.A.A.C.P., that he came to be an admirer of Malcolm X,²³ that he was prevented from getting his passport by American consular authorities in Paris between 1955 and 1957,²⁴ that he was a journalist and lived in Paris at

a time when political commitment was no idle talk (viz. the positions of J.P. Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Gisèle Halimi, J.J. Servan-Schreiber, Francis Jeanson, Robert Devezies and many others), it seems unlikely that such a willingness to bring about a better world could have been left untapped. Judging from the attitudes of some African American expatriates, as they came to be disclosed later (for instance Hoyt W. Fuller liaising between Paris and Algiers F.L.N. militants in 1959²⁵), one wouldn't be surprised to learn some day that William Gardner Smith was one of those porteurs de valises (Like Henri, the French militant of the F.L.N. in The Stone Face) who contributed to bringing an end -- long overdue -- to the suffering of the peoples of France and Algeria.

If William Gardner Smith's involvement in the Algerian liberation movement still remains a moot point, what is less debatable is the fact that his Algerian experience in Paris has made him adopt a more militant attitude towards the struggle of the African Americans. This is evidenced in particular in Return to Black America, the essay he wrote after his American tour in the 'Hot Summer' of 67.

In his appraisal of the Black youth's political awareness, he makes reference to the Algerian experience:

It was clear that many of the youth gangs were becoming the hard core of the Black nationalist movement whether or not they actually joined any nationalist organization. The same thing, I repeat, occurred with Algerian gangs -- of adults and youth -- during the Algerian liberation struggle.²⁶

He even establishes a comparison between Ellsworth 'Bumpy' Johnson, 'King of the Harlem Underworld' protecting C.O.R.E. militants in Washington D.C. in 1967 and Ali-La-Pointe's putting his men at the service of the F.L.N. urban guerillas during the Battle of Algiers.²⁷

All this may seem anecdotal and rather passé, seen from the vantage point of 1992. But listen to this:

[...] The power of the United States was built on the slaughter of the Indians, the barbarism of the slave trade, the economic enslavement of Latin America and other parts of the world...

[...] The American crime rate is the highest in the world. It is a country of 'rugged... individualism', institutionalized racism, where childhood heroes are fast-shooting cow-boys, coin-flipping gangsters and Superman...

Ours is a country born in violence, bred in violence: a glorifier of violence.²⁸

Doesn't this sound like Fanon's thrust and tone of voice in The Wretched of the Earth? Don't we still need such a reminder - harsh as it may be -- in this our age of Rambo and the 'New World Economic Order'?

1. Michel Fabre, La Rive Noire: de Harlem à la Seine (Paris: Lieu Commun, 1985), p. 229.

2. Conversation with Mrs. Phyllis Earle Ford, 4 December 1988, Philadelphia. May I take this opportunity to extend my thanks to William

Gardner Smith's mother and sisters for their warm welcome, and to Mr. James G. Spady for his kindly arranging the meeting.

3. According to Michel Fabre, Richard Wright was profoundly shocked by Albert Camus's position towards the Algerian problem: "Wright ne peut comprendre la position ambigue de Camus, le Pied Noir, sur la'Algèrie. Comment peut-on être, s interroge-t-u, ala fois un ennemi du racisme et un partisan de l' Algèrie française? Lorsque camus couronné par le Prix Nobel, déclare qu'entre la justice et sa mère, il choisirait sa mère, Wright est profondément choqué. D'autant plus que cette boutade suscite une résonance particulière chez celui qui, justement a choisi la justice contre la mère-patrie". Cf. La Rive Noire, op. cit. p. 186.

4. He is said to have contributed, in 1962, an article to the gaullist weekly Candide in which he compared the Negro problem to the Algerian one; which earned him threats from the O.A.S. Cf. letter to Carl Van Vechten, 9 October 1962, Yale University Library; quoted in La Rive Noire, p. 264.

5. Manifesto, issued on 6 September 1961, signed by French writers, scientists and artists, recognising Algeria's right to Independence and inciting conscripts to desert.

6. A letter, supposedly signed by cartoonist Ollie Harrington, implicitly supporting Algeria's armed struggle ("Any American who thinks that France of her own will, will grant Algeria, if not independence, at least some liberal status where seven million Algerians will not be crushed politically by a million Europeans, is mad") was sent to Life magazine and published on 21 October 1957.

For full documentation on the subject see Leroy S. Hodges, Jr., Portrait of an Expatriate - William Gardner Smith, Writer (Westport, Connecticut and London, England: Greenwood Press, 1985), pff. 55; also Michel Fabre, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright, Isabel Barzun trs. (New York: William Morrow, 1973), pff. 462. The fact that Black Americans were the hostages of French and American rival politics on such issues as the Algerian war, the Suez Canal expedition, the Negro problem in the U.S.A. is underlined by Chester Himes in his detective novel titled A Case of Rape (1963).

7. William Gardner Smith, The Stone Face (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Co. 1967), p. 105.

All further page references are to this edition.

8. James Baldwin, Going to Meet the Man, (London: Michael Joseph, 1984), p. 156. All further page references are to this edition.

9. *Ibid.*, p 157.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 158.

11. Thousands of people were deported and more than two hundred died, some of them deliberately drowned in the Seine.

12. The Stone Face, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 202.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 59

16. *Ibid.* p. 210.

17. *Ibid.* p. 7.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

19. Conversation with Mrs. Edith Earle, 4 December 1988, Philadelphia.

20. Portrait of an Expatriate, *op. cit.*, See footnote 9 in Chapter IV (p. 108). Solange Royez, letter to author and response to questionnaire, 18 July, 1977.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 59;

22. Chester Himes, The Quality of Hurt: the Autobiography of Chester Himes (London: Michael Joseph, 1973), p. 185 of Vol. I.

23. Conversation with Mrs Edith Earle, *op. cit.*

24. Portrait of an Expatriate, *op. cit.*: see footnote 28 of Chapter IV (p. 108)

25. Hoyt W. Fuller, 'Algiers Journal', in The Negro Digest, October 1969, p. 73.

26. William Gardner Smith, Return to Black America (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1970), p. 36.

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27. I also have it, by Mr. James G. Spady that William Gardner Smith visited Algeria in 1967, 1972, 73 and 74; that his doctor, Mr. Jacques Tomasini lived in Algeria; and that he intervened in favour of

Stokely Carmichael with President de Gaulle.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 185.